

Tocqueville on Socialism

Speech Made before the Constituent Assembly during the Discussion of the New Constitution on the Right to Work³⁰

Session of September 12, 1848

If I am not mistaken you are not expecting me to respond to the last part of the speech that you have just heard. It contains the statement of a complete and complicated system to which I do not intend to oppose another system.

My aim now is simply to discuss the amendment in favor of which, or rather concerning which, the preceding speaker has just spoken.

What is this amendment? What is its bearing? What, as I see it, is its fatal tendency? This is what I have to examine.

First, a word on the work of the Commission.

The Commission, as the preceding speaker told you, had in reality two drafts but fundamentally it had and it continues to have only one thought. To begin with, it had a first formulation. The words which have been expressed at this tribune and elsewhere, and better than the words, the facts themselves have shown that this formulation was an incomplete and dangerous expression of its thought. It has rejected not the thought but the form.

This formulation is now taken up again. This is what we presently find ourselves confronting.

The two versions are placed before us. So be it. Let us compare them in the new light of the facts.

In its latest formulation, the Commission limits itself to imposing on society the duty to come to the aid, be it by work or by assistance strictly speaking, of all hardships to the extent of its resources. In saying this, the Commission undoubtedly wanted to impose on the state a more extensive and more sacred duty than that which has been imposed until now; but it did not want to create something absolutely new; it wanted to expand, consecrate, and regularize public charity; it did not want to generate anything other than public charity. The amendment, in contrast, does something different, and does much more. The amendment, with the meaning given to it in speeches and, above all, by recent actions, the amendment, which grants to each individual the general, absolute and

irresistible right to work, this amendment leads necessarily to one of the following consequences. Either the state will undertake to provide work to all unemployed workers who come forward, thus being drawn little by little into the industrial process; or, as it is the industrial contractor that operates everywhere, the only one which cannot refuse to provide work and the one which usually imposes the least work, it is invincibly led to become the principal, and soon, as it were, the only industrial entrepreneur. Once this point has been reached, taxation is no longer the means of funding the machinery of government but the principal means of supporting industry. By thus accumulating in its hands all individual capital, the state finally becomes the sole owner of everything. Well, this is communism. [Disturbance]

On the other hand, if the state wishes to escape from the fatal logic which I have just described, if it wishes to provide work for all workers who come forward, not by itself or through its own resources but by seeing to it that they find it in private industry, it is led inevitably to the regulation of industry adopted, if I am not mistaken, in the system of the last honorable speaker. It is obliged to ensure that there is no unemployment; this leads it inevitably to distribute workers in such a way as they do not compete with one another, to regulate wages, sometimes in order to restrain production, sometimes to accelerate it, in short, to become the great and sole organizer of labor. [Movement]

Thus, although at first sight the texts of the Commission and that of the amendment seem to come together, these two texts lead to quite contrary results. There are two paths which, beginning at the same point, finish up by being separated by an immense gulf: one leads to an extension of public charity; at the end of the other, what do we see? – Socialism. [Expressions of agreement]

Let us not deceive ourselves. We gain nothing by postponing discussions whose principle involves the very foundations of society and which, sooner or later, come to the surface in one way or another, sometimes in words and sometimes in actions. Today what is at stake behind the amendment of the honorable M. Mathieu, perhaps unbeknownst to the author, but which I at least for my part see as clear as day, is socialism. [Prolonged disturbance – murmuring from the left].

Yes, gentlemen, sooner or later the question of socialism, which everybody fears and which nobody has dared to discuss until now, must come before this tribune. This Assembly must settle this question; we must relieve the country of the burden that it is made to bear by this idea of socialism. With regard to this amendment, and I confess that it is

principally because of this that I have come to the tribune, the question of socialism must be resolved. It is necessary that we know, that the Assembly, that all of France knows, whether the February Revolution is or is not a socialist revolution. [Very good]

Behind the June barricades, did I not hear the cry, said and repeated again and again: *Long live the democratic and social Republic!* What is meant by these words? We need to know. Above all, the National Assembly must say.

The Assembly will understand that my intention is not to examine before you all the various systems comprised under the same word of socialism. I wish simply to try to identify, in as few words as possible, the distinctive characteristics found in all these systems so as to see if the thing which has this physiognomy and which bears these characteristics was the goal of the February Revolution.

If I am not mistaken, gentlemen, the first distinctive characteristic of all the systems which bear the name of socialism is an energetic, continuous, immoderate appeal to the material passions of men. [Signs of approbation]

Thus, there are those who have said that "it is a matter of rehabilitating the flesh." Others have said that "labor, even of the harshest kind, must not only be useful but agreeable." Still others have said that "men must be rewarded not according to their merits but according to their needs." And finally, the last of the socialists of whom I wish to speak has just told you that the goal of socialism and, according to him, the goal of the February Revolution was to secure *unlimited consumption* for everybody.

I am therefore right in saying, gentlemen, that the general and typical characteristic of all the schools of socialism is an energetic and continuous appeal to the material passions of man.

There is a second characteristic: an attack, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, but always continuous, against the very principles of private property. Since the first socialist³¹ who said fifty years ago that *property was the origin of all the evils of the world*, to the socialist whom we heard at this tribune and who, less charitably than the first, shifting from property to the property owner, told us that *property was theft*,³² all socialists, all of them, I am bold enough to say, attack individual property either directly or indirectly. [It's true; it's true]. I do not pretend to say that everyone attacks it in the open and, if I may say, rather brutal manner adopted by one of our colleagues; but I say that all of them, by more or less circuitous means, if they do not destroy it, transform it, diminish it, constrain it, limit it, and make of it something else than the private property that we know and that we have known since the beginning of the world. [Very vigorous signs of agreement]

We come to the third and last characteristic, the one which above all exemplifies socialists of every color, of every school: the deep distrust of liberty, of human reason, a profound scorn for the individual in his own right, for the human condition. There is a continuous, diverse, incessant attempt to mutilate, to curtail, and to constrain human freedom in every possible way. There is the idea that the state must not only direct society but must be, as it were, the master of every man – how should I put it? – the idea that the state must be his master, his tutor, his teacher [Very good]; that from fear of letting him fall, the state must always be by his side, above him, around him, in order to guide him, protect him, sustain him, restrain him. In brief, as I have just said, it is the elimination of human freedom to a lesser or greater extent. [More signs of agreement] If, at this point, I had to find a definitive and general formula to express what socialism as a whole appears to me to be, I would say that it is a new form of servitude. [Vigorous approval]

You see, gentlemen, that I have not gone into the details of these systems. I have portrayed socialism according to its principal characteristics, but these are sufficient to identify it. Wherever you see them, rest assured that socialism is present, and wherever you see socialism, be assured that these characteristics will be found.

Well, gentlemen, what does all of this mean? Is this, as has been claimed on many occasions, the continuation, the legitimate complement, the perfecting of the French Revolution? Is it, as had been said many times, the complement and legitimate development of democracy? No, gentlemen, it is neither one nor the other. Recall the French Revolution, gentlemen. Return to the terrible and glorious origin of our modern history. Did the French Revolution, as a speaker claimed yesterday, achieve the great deeds that rendered it illustrious in the world by appealing to the material sentiments, to the material needs of man? Do you believe that it was by speaking of wages, of well-being, of limitless consumption, of the unlimited satisfaction of physical needs?

Citizen Mathieu (from the Drôme):³³ I said no such thing.

Citizen de Tocqueville: Do you believe that it was by speaking of such things that it was able to awaken, that it excited, that it organized, rushed to the frontiers, threw before the hazards of war, placed before death, a whole generation? No, gentlemen, no. It was by speaking of higher and finer things, by speaking of love of country, by speaking of virtue, of generosity, of disinterestedness, of glory, that these great things were done. Let us be certain, gentlemen, that there is only one secret to making men do great things, and this is by appealing to great feelings.³⁴ [Very good. Very good]

And property, gentlemen, property! Without doubt the French Revolution waged a cruel and energetic war against some property owners, but as for the principle of private property itself, it always respected and honored it. It gave property pride of place in its constitutions. No other people have treated it more magnificently. They have engraved it even on the title page of their laws.

The French Revolution did more. Not only did it consecrate individual property, it extended it, and thereby caused a greater number of citizens to share in it. [Several exclamations – That is what we ask!]

And today, gentlemen, it is thanks to this that we do not have to fear the fatal consequences of the doctrines which the socialists are spreading through the country and within these walls. It is because the French Revolution peopled this country of France with ten million property holders that we can allow your doctrines to appear before this tribune without danger. Undoubtedly they can upset society, but, thanks to the French Revolution, they will not prevail against it or destroy it. [Very good!]

And finally, gentlemen, as for liberty, one thing strikes me. The Old Regime, whose opinions, we must acknowledge, undeniably differed from those of the socialists on many points, was with regard to political ideas far less removed from it than one might believe. All things considered, it was closer to them than to us. Indeed, the Old Regime was of the opinion that wisdom resides in the state alone, that its subjects are weak and infirm beings whom one must always lead by the hand for fear that they might fall or hurt themselves; that it is good continually to constrict, to oppose, to constrain individual liberties; that it is necessary to regulate industry, to guarantee the quality of goods, to prevent free competition. On this point, the Old Regime thought precisely like the socialists of today. And who was it, I ask, that thought differently? The French Revolution.

Gentlemen, who was it that broke all those fetters which on all sides restricted the free movement of persons, of goods, of ideas? What was it that restored man to his individual greatness, to his true greatness, what? The French Revolution itself. [Approval and uproar] It is the French Revolution which abolished all these restrictions, which broke the chains that, under another name, you would like to re-establish. And this was not only true of the members of the Constituent Assembly, that immortal assembly which founded liberty not only in France but throughout the world.³⁵ It was not only the members of that illustrious Assembly that rejected the doctrines of the Old Regime. It was true of the eminent men of all the assemblies which followed it. It was true even of the representative of the bloody dictatorship of the Convention. The other day I was reading his words again. Here they are.

“Flee”, said Robespierre, “the old obsession” – you see, it is not new [Smiles] – “flee the old obsession of wanting to govern too much; allow individuals and families the right to do freely anything that does not harm others; allow the communes the right to run their own affairs; in short, return to the liberty of the individual everything that has been illegitimately taken away, whatever does not necessarily belong to the public authority.”³⁶ [Excitement]

Well, gentlemen, is it likely that this great movement of the French Revolution would lead only to this society painted for us with delight by the socialists, to a regulated, ordered, formalized society where the state is responsible for everything, where the individual is nothing, where society gathers and contains in itself all power and all life, where the goal assigned to man is well-being alone, a society without air and where light hardly penetrates? Was it for a society of bees or beavers, for a society of clever animals rather than of free and civilized men, that the French Revolution was made? Was it for this that so many famous men would die on the field of battle or upon the scaffold, that so much glorious blood flooded the earth? Was it for this that so many passions were aroused, that so much genius, so many virtues, were to appear in the world?

No, no! I swear by the men who succumbed to this great cause. No, it is not for this that they died. It was for something greater, more sacred, more worthy of them and of humanity. [Very good] If that was all there was to do, the revolution was useless, an improved old regime would have sufficed. [Prolonged reaction]

I was just saying that socialism has claimed to be the legitimate development of democracy. Unlike several of our colleagues, I will not try to search out the true etymology of this word democracy. I will not explore the garden of Greek roots in order to discover from where this word comes, as was done yesterday. [Laughter]. I will seek democracy where I have seen it, living, active, triumphant, in the only country on earth where it exists, where it has been able to establish something great and lasting here in the modern world, in America. [Whispers]

There you will see a nation in which all conditions are even more equal than they are among us, where the social state, mores, laws, are all democratic, where everything derives from and returns to the people, but where each individual enjoys a more complete independence and a greater freedom than at any other time or in any other country in the world, an essentially democratic country, I repeat, the only democracy that exists today in the world, the only truly democratic republics known to history. And in these republics you will search in vain for socialism. Not only have socialist theories not taken hold in the public mind, but

they have played such a small part in the discussions and the affairs of this great nation that one has not even had the right to say that people feared them.

Today America is the country in the world where democracy is practiced to the greatest extent, and it is also the one where socialist doctrines, which you claim to be so in accord with democracy, have the least currency, the country in the universe where those who support its doctrines would have the least advantage in presenting themselves. For my part, I confess that I would see no great inconvenience were they to go to America, but in their own interest I do not advise them to do so. [Loud laughter]

A Representative: Their belongings are being sold at this very moment.³⁷

Citizen de Tocqueville: No, gentlemen, democracy and socialism are not linked to each other. They are not only different but contradictory things. What if by chance, democracy were to consist of a government more interfering, more detailed, more restrictive than all others, the only difference being that it would be elected by the people and would act in the name of the people? In that case, what would you have done, if not have given to tyranny an aura of legitimacy that it did not previously possess and to have secured for it the strength and omnipotence that it lacked? Democracy extends the sphere of individual independence, socialism restricts it. Democracy gives the greatest possible value to every man, socialism turns every man into an agent, an instrument, a number. Democracy and socialism are linked by only one word, equality; but note the difference: democracy wants equality in liberty, and socialism wants equality through constraint and servitude. [Very good! Very good!]

Therefore, the February revolution should not be social. If it must not be, it is important to have the courage to say so. If this must not be the case, we must have the strength to proclaim it openly, as I am doing myself here. When one does not want the ends, one must not wish for the means. If one does not want the goal, one must not set out on the path that leads there. Today, it is being proposed that we take this path.

We must not follow the course of action long ago set out by Babeuf, the grandfather of all modern socialists. [Approving laughter] We must not fall into the trap that he himself pointed out, or rather which was pointed out in his name by his historian, his friend, his pupil, Buonarroti.³⁸ Listen to what Buonarroti said. It merits being listened to even fifty years later.

A Representative: There is no Babouvist here.

Citizen de Tocqueville: "The abolition of individual property and the establishment of the great national community was the final goal of his

labors (of Babeuf). But he was very guarded about making it the object of a decree on the day after victory; he believed that it was necessary to act in such a way as to cause the entire people to prescribe individual property out of need and out of interest.”

Here are the principal directives which he counted on using himself (it is his own eulogist who is speaking): “Establish by law a public order in which property owners, while provisionally retaining their property, would no longer obtain abundance, gratification or consideration; where, forced to spend the greater part of their income to cover the costs of cultivation and of taxation, crushed beneath the weight of progressive taxation, removed from public affairs, deprived of all influence, forming nothing more than a suspect class of foreigners within the State, they would be forced to emigrate while abandoning their possessions or be reduced themselves to ratifying the establishment of the universal community.” [Laughter]

A Representative: There we are!

Citizen de Tocqueville: There, gentlemen, is the program of Babeuf. With all my heart I desire that it should not be the program of the February Republic. No, the February republic must be democratic, but it must not be socialist.

A Voice from the left: Yes! [No! No! Interruption]

Citizen de Tocqueville: And if it is not socialist, what therefore shall it be?

A representative on the left: Royalist!

Citizen de Tocqueville, turning towards this side: It might perhaps be so if we left it to you, [vigorous approval] but this will not happen.

If the February Revolution is not socialist, what therefore will it be? Is it, as many people say and think, a pure accident? Must it be no more than a simple change of men and of laws? I do not think so.

When, last January, I spoke in the Chamber of Deputies before the then majority, which grumbled on these benches, for other reasons admittedly but in the same way that they grumbled just now. . . . [Very good! Very good!]

[The speaker gestures to the left]

I said to it: Take care, the wind of revolution is rising: do you not feel it? Revolutions are coming: do you not see them? We are sitting on a volcano. I said that: *Le Moniteur* testifies to it. And why did I say it? . . . [Interruptions on the left].

Was I feeble-minded enough to believe that revolutions were approaching because this or that man was in power, because this or that incident of

political life excited the country for a moment? No, gentlemen, what made me believe that revolutions were approaching, what, in effect, produced the revolution, was this: I saw that, due to a profound departure from the most sacred principles spread across the world by the French Revolution, power, influence, honors, in short, life itself, had been confined within the very narrow limits of a single class. I saw that there was no country in the world which presented a single comparable example. Even in aristocratic England, the England that we then so often made the mistake of taking as an example and as a model, even in aristocratic England the people participated, if not completely and directly, at least widely and indirectly, in public affairs. If they did not vote themselves (and they did often vote), at least they made their voice heard. The people made known their will to those who governed and they listened to each other.³⁹

Here, there was nothing of the kind. I repeat: all rights; all power; all influence; all honors, political life in its entirety, was confined within an extremely narrow class; and, beneath that, nothing!

This is what made me believe that revolution was at our gates. I saw that within this small privileged class, something was happening that always occurred in the long run in small, exclusive aristocracies: public life was being extinguished, corruption was spreading every day, intrigue was taking the place of public virtues, and everything was weakening and deteriorating.

So much for the top of society.

And what was happening at the bottom of society? Beneath what was then called the legal country, the people properly so-called, the people who were less badly treated than is said (since we must be just above all toward the fallen powers) but to whom little thought was given, the people, living, so to speak, outside the official world, were creating a life of their own. Psychologically and emotionally separating themselves ever more from those competent to lead them, they gave their mind and their heart to those who, naturally, were in contact with them, and many of the latter were ineffectual utopians, as we have just seen, or dangerous demagogues.

It is because I saw these two classes, one small, one large, separating themselves little by little from one another, the one filled with jealousy, defiance and anger, the other with thoughtlessness and sometimes egoism and insensitiveness, because I saw these two classes moving in isolation and in opposite directions, that I said and I had the right to say: the winds of revolution are rising and soon revolution is going to come. [Very good]

Was it to accomplish something like this that the February revolution occurred? No, gentlemen, I do not think so. As much as any of you, I think

the contrary. I desire the contrary. I desire it not only in the interest of liberty but also in the interest of public security.

I confess that I myself did not work for the February revolution and I do not have the right to say so, but given that the Revolution has occurred, I want it to be a genuine revolution because I want it to be the last. I know that it is only genuine revolutions which endure. A revolution which produces nothing, which is sterile from birth, whose loins are barren, can serve only one purpose; that of giving birth to more revolutions to follow. [Approval]

Therefore, I want the February revolution to have a clear, precise, perceptible meaning that shines everywhere and that everyone can see.

And what is that meaning? I will express it succinctly: the February revolution must be the true continuation, the real and sincere fulfillment, of what the French revolution had looked for, it must be the implementation of what our fathers could only have thought about. [Strong approval]

Citizen Ledru-Rollin:⁴⁰ I request permission to speak.

Citizen de Tocqueville: That is what the February revolution must be, neither more nor less. The French Revolution had willed that there should be no classes in society. It never had the idea of dividing citizens, as you are doing, into proprietors and proletarians. You will not find any of these hate-filled and warlike words in any of the great documents of the French Revolution. Politically, the Revolution desired that there should be no classes: the Restoration, the July Monarchy wanted the opposite. We must want what our fathers wanted.

The Revolution wanted that public burdens should be equal, really equal for all citizens. It failed in that. Public burdens have remained unequal in certain areas. We must make certain that they are equal. On this point we must want what our fathers wanted and put into practice what they were unable to do. [Very good]

As I have already told you, the French Revolution did not have the ridiculous pretension of creating a social power which would itself directly produce each citizen's fortune, well-being and ease of life, which would substitute the highly questionable wisdom of governments for the practical and self-interested wisdom of the governed. It believed that it had sufficiently fulfilled its role in giving enlightenment and liberty to every citizen. [Very good!]

It had the strong, noble, and proud belief, which you seem to lack, that for an honest and courageous man it is sufficient to have these two things, enlightenment and liberty, and that he need ask for nothing more from those who governed him.

The Revolution wanted this. It lacked the time and the means to accomplish it. We must want it and do it.

Finally, the French Revolution had the desire, and it was this desire that made it not only sacred but holy in the eyes of the world, it had the desire to introduce charity into politics. It conceived a broader, more general and higher idea than previously held of the obligations of the state toward the poor, towards those citizens who suffered. It is this idea that we must take up again, not, I repeat, in order to substitute the foresight and wisdom of the state for the foresight and wisdom of the individual but by using the means at the state's disposal efficiently and really to aid all those who suffer, aid all those who, after having exhausted all their own resources, would be reduced to poverty if the state did not hold out its hand.

This is what the French Revolution wanted to do. This is what we ourselves must do.

Is there any socialism in this?

On the left; Yes! Yes! There is only that!

Citizen de Tocqueville: No! No! No, there is no socialism there. There is Christian charity applied to politics. There is nothing there. . . . [Interruption]

The President of the Assembly: You disagree. This is as clear as day. You do not have the same opinion. You will mount the tribune, but do not interrupt.

Citizen de Tocqueville: There is nothing there that gives the workers a right in respect of the state. There is nothing there that obliges the state to replace individual foresight, thrift, and individual honesty. There is nothing there that authorizes the state to intervene in industry, to impose restrictions upon it, to tyrannize the individual in order better to govern him or, as is insolently maintained, to save him from himself. Here is nothing else than Christianity applied to politics.

Yes, the February revolution must be Christian and democratic, but it must not be socialist. These words summarize my thoughts, and I end by pronouncing them. [Very good! Very good!]

30. *OC*, III: 3, 167–80. Another translation of this text (by Seymour Drescher) was previously published in *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, 179–92. The text printed here is a new translation of Tocqueville's speech. An analysis of this important text can be found in Watkins, *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Second Republic*, 207–21.
31. The author in question was François-Noël ("Gracchus") Babeuf (1760–1797), prominent political journalist and one of the first social revolutionaries in Europe, who became a revered figure on the left.
32. Reference to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), prominent French socialist thinker, author of such important books such *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* (1840) *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité* (1843), and *Système des contradictions économiques, ou philosophie de la misère*, (2 vols., 1846).
33. Antoine-Philippe Mathieu (1808–1865), elected deputy in 1848 and editor of *La Solidarité républicaine*.
34. Compare this with what Tocqueville had to say about the same issue in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*: "I have never met with a revolution where one could see at the start, in so many men, a more sincere patriotism, more disinterest, more true greatness. . . . This is 1789, a time of inexperience doubtless, but of generosity, of enthusiasm, of virility, and of greatness, a time of immortal memory" (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*, I, 208; 244).
35. It would be interesting to compare and contrast Tocqueville's rather favorable view of the Constituent Assembly with Burke's strong critique of the Assembly in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).
36. The fragment is taken from Robespierre's speech on the Constitution (May 10, 1793).
37. Reference to the communist colony founded by Cabet and his disciples in Texas in 1847.
38. Filippo Michele Buonarroti (1761–1837), disciple of "Gracchus" Babeuf and narrator of the latter's failed Conspiracy of the Equals. Babouvism has been

seen as one of the earliest examples of socialist ideology and conspiratorial practice.

39. Allusion to the successful Reform Bill of 1831–32 that extended the franchise in England. During the 1820s, the pressure for reform slowly mounted. The preservation of a corrupt and inadequate electoral system was regarded as out of step with the new spirit of the time, because it failed to represent properly the new industrial and commercial interests of the country.
40. Alexandre-August Ledru-Rollin (1807–74), journalist under the July Monarchy, he was briefly Minister of the Interior under the Second Republic and then candidate for the Presidency (when he received only 370,000 votes). After the protests of June 13, 1849, he went into exile in England.